

97-84109-26

Veiller, Lawrence

A housing programme

New York

1912

97-84109-36

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331.83	
Z2	Veiller, Lawrence, 1871 or 2-1959.
v 4	A housing programme. New York, 1912.
	[18] p.
[342	
Box 321]	
	Vol. of Pamphlets

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## TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm

REDUCTION RATIO: 11:1

IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA ☒ IIA IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 6/5/97

INITIALS: TLM

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MAIN ENTRY: Veiller, Lawrence

A housing programme

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FEB 28, 1933

A HOUSING PROGRAMME  
FOR NEW YORK

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Box 321

FEBRUARY 1, 1912.

April 18, 1931 JAH:ce

## CONFIDENTIAL

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE

TENEMENT HOUSE COMMITTEE.

GENTLEMEN:

**L**AST summer, for my own interest, I outlined a programme of all the possible things that an active housing organization might do to meet New York's housing needs. While making this programme comprehensive, I sought at the same time to make it practicable and only to include in it the things which a committee like our own could advantageously do. There was, of course, no thought that our Committee, or any other organization, should attempt to do all of these things at once.

Heretofore I have not sought to present many of these questions to the Committee for their consideration, or to extend to a very great extent the work which the Committee was doing. There have been many reasons why, up to the present time, it was not wise to enlarge our activities. For a year and a half we have had as secretary of the Committee a person who was entirely new to the work, and it was essential that the secretary should become more expert and more familiar with the details of the work before we could wisely undertake new responsibilities. The attitude of the public with regard to the tenement-house law and the feeling of antagonism which has existed for so long to the Tenement House Department and the constant attempts to amend the tenement-house law at each session of the legislature, have all made me hesitate to suggest any larger operations for our Tenement House Committee.

But many of these reasons no longer operate. The secretary of the Committee is now sufficiently expert to be entrusted with new responsibilities. The antagonism toward the Tene-

ment House Department has been greatly allayed owing to Commissioner Murphy's diplomatic handling of the public. The attempts to weaken the tenement-house law have each year grown less and less effective. The mere fact that last year with Tammany in the saddle, in complete control of the legislature, there should have been no more serious attempts to amend the tenement-house law than the attempts we have had to fight, is itself a striking and significant indication of the extent to which that law is established.

It seems to me, therefore, that the time has come when the Committee should consider the possibility of extending its activities and taking up more constructive work. We have the funds to permit a reasonable enlargement of the staff. There is a man who seems to be extraordinarily good material, with exceptional references and experience, who is available for the position of assistant secretary should we desire to enlarge our field.

With this introductory explanation, I would submit for the consideration of the Committee the following programme of activities from which the Committee can select those which seem to them the most urgent or the most desirable or most likely to bring immediate results:

#### PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES.

##### I. CO-OPERATION WITH THE TENEMENT HOUSE DEPARTMENT.

—Under this topic may be grouped a number of suggestions all of which have to deal with the improvement of the work of the Department. While the work of the Department is on the whole generally satisfactory, there are numerous respects in which it can be materially improved and strengthened. There have been very few constructive changes made in its methods since the deForest administration, and in a number of respects it has fallen below the standards of that time. The following are some of the more important ways in which improvement in departmental procedure can be effected:

A. GENERAL STUDY OF ADMINISTRATION.—Some one person on the executive staff ought to spend a large part of his time constantly going over the methods of administration in the three branches of the Department, especially in Manhattan and the Bronx, to see that things are being done according to law. To illustrate: I learned, merely by chance last winter, that the Department was approving plans for so-called "kitchenette" apartments, in which the kitchen was a small, dark closet with a sink in it and a folding gas stove. This room was smaller than the minimum prescribed by law and had no ventilation to the outer air. It was the one kitchen for the flat, which consisted of two or three rooms and bath in addition. The building was built ostensibly as a tenement-house. This was a clear violation of the law.

Upon taking this matter up with the Commissioner and pointing out to him the legal considerations involved, I was able to secure a ruling from the Commissioner by which the approval of such plans in the future was stopped, and the building of this undesirable type of house terminated.

Another illustration is afforded by the plans of an apartment house on Riverside Drive which has just come to my notice. This house contains 7 apartments on a floor; in each apartment there is a large room, one of the main rooms of the apartment, which has no direct light and ventilation but is labeled "foyer." It is not a small foyer hall such as might reasonably be approved by the Department, but is a real room masquerading under the guise of "foyer."

Again, it is reported that the Department has practically stopped vacating any tenement houses. About this I have no information; it is a matter which should be investigated.

These are but a few illustrations of the many directions in which the enforcement of the law should be constantly checked up.

B. THE NEW SYSTEM IN THE DEPARTMENT.—About a year ago Commissioner Murphy organized a new system in the Department with reference to the grouping of violations which was intended to simplify the Department's work and reduce the volume of pending violations. As this plan was originally presented, it seemed to have a number of elements of weakness in it. The Department has appeared quite satisfied with the results obtained under it. A study should be made to see how it has worked and what the results actually are, and whether the great reduction of violations reported is only on paper or really represents changed physical conditions at the buildings.

C. DARK ROOMS.—The Department reports great progress in the elimination of dark rooms during the past year, both in Manhattan and Brooklyn. A study should be made to see how much of this is on paper and how much actual. An estimate should be made of the time within which at present rate of progress all of the dark rooms will be corrected. A few years ago we amended the law so as to permit the Commissioner to require rooms that were dark, which did not open on the outer air, to have the walls and ceilings painted with white paint or kalsomine. An investigation should be made of the extent to which this power has been used, with the idea of urging upon the Commissioner its greater use if it has not been availed of.

D. BASEMENT ROOMS.—Up to within the last two or three years the provisions of the law with regard to the occupancy of basement and cellar rooms in old buildings had practically never been enforced. With the amendments which the Committee concurred in three years ago, the law is now on a practicable basis and should be strictly enforced. A study should be made in selected typical districts, to see whether the Department is permitting basement rooms to be occupied improperly.

E. INDEX OF LANDLORDS.—The Department is now singularly unequipped to punish adequately those land-

lords who make a practice of defying the Department's orders and dragging out their compliance through long periods of time. While the Department's records are organized in the most effective way to give all the facts about a given tenement-house, there has been no system established which would give all the facts about a given landlord, so that now each landlord is prosecuted without regard to the extent to which he has offended in the past. In fact the Department does not have that information. This could readily be obtained by a change in the system. Such a record was not feasible during the deForest administration, as the administration was too young to have accumulated the facts. It is greatly needed now.

The way to bring this about would be for the Director to prepare a card schedule and outline a system for this purpose, and to take up the matter with the Commissioner who will undoubtedly be glad to adopt it.

2. CORPORATION COUNSEL'S OFFICE.—So much of the effectiveness of the enforcement of the tenement-house law depends upon the administration of the special branch of the Corporation Counsel's office in charge of this work, that a careful study should be made of that office. This was planned for last summer, but the protracted session of the legislature and the special session, with the necessity of active work on charter revision, made this impossible at that time.

It is proposed that a complete study now be made. It is believed that such a study will disclose conditions in that office requiring drastic remedy. It is believed that there will be found there is great delay in the prosecution of cases, that the penalties imposed are inadequate, that there is no accurate means of keeping track of cases; that many of them are indefinitely pigeon-holed because of lack of proper system, and that vast numbers of cases are returned to the Tenement House Department because they are alleged to be in improper form, many months after the cases were originally forwarded for prosecution; that little effort is made to collect judgments or similar

liens, and that many of the remedies provided for the proper enforcement of the law are not availed of.

3. REVISION OF TENEMENT HOUSE LAW.—A complete scientific revision of the tenement-house law, especially as to its form, is greatly to be desired, but it is, in my judgment, too dangerous to attempt until all legislative conditions are perfectly adapted to it. This is certainly not the time. Last year certain improvements and advances in the law were suggested by Commissioner Murphy and embodied in a bill drafted by him, in co-operation with the Director. This bill passed the legislature but on the last day of the session, five minutes before the closing, was recalled from the Governor by the Assemblyman who introduced the bill, for reasons of his own. This measure should be re-introduced in the present legislature and every effort made to secure its passage.

4. FURTHER IMPROVEMENT OF OLDER HOUSES.—It seems to me that the time has now come when we might wisely consider what further improvements in the older houses might be brought about, now that the Department has made such excellent progress with the removal of school sinks and the cutting in of windows into the dark rooms. The most undesirable type of tenement house now remaining is not the old four-room and six-room deep house, but the dumb-bell tenement, which, as the Committee knows, was the type built in large numbers between 1879 and 1901. While we have always called this a hopeless type, still there are improvements that can be made in it in my judgment in a practicable way at comparatively slight expense which will greatly improve the living conditions and which should be required by law. Of course, any attempt to get such a change in the law will meet with serious opposition from the owners of the older buildings. No such attempt should be made until we have established certain facts experimentally.

The changes which I have in mind for the improvement of the dumb-bell, relate to light and ventilation. The light can be improved without any further legislation. The two methods

which are practicable, are for the Commissioner to require the painting or whitewashing of the air-shaft walls at more frequent intervals than at present, and to insist upon the painting with white paint of the walls and ceilings and woodwork of the rooms opening on the air-shafts.

The ventilation can be improved greatly by requiring, at the bottom of these air-shafts, two intakes or tunnels, one to the street and one to the yard. These can be built, I believe, at very slight expense and the improvement in ventilation will be great.

Before, however, urging a change in the law which will make these improvements compulsory in all buildings of this class, we should first experiment with it and make these changes in the air-shafts of one dumb-bell tenement and contrast the results obtained with an adjoining building of the same type in which the changes are not made. My recommendation would be that we obtain permission to make these changes in houses of this type, getting some buildings from public-spirited real estate men or property owners who would be willing to let us use their buildings for this purpose, carrying on for a period of six months or a year the most careful and accurate scientific tests as to the improvement in ventilation, calling in to help us Professor Winslow of the American Museum of Natural History and the College of the City of New York, who is an expert on such matters. If the results of these experiments demonstrate that the improvement is of sufficient importance to warrant the change in the law, and also demonstrate that the cost is not too great, I would then recommend that at the end of this period, which would be a year or more, we should seek legislation to compel the installation of these tunnels at the bottom of every old-style air shaft.

5. HOUSING CONFERENCE.—I would recommend that the Committee should hold, in the near future, a housing conference on New York's needs as a means of focusing attention on the various problems before the Committee, and especially with a view to fostering and developing co-operation among



social workers and philanthropic organizations in the Committee's work. Such a conference should extend over two or three days and should be carefully worked up and should include the discussion of many of the items in this programme.

6. EDUCATION OF THE TENANTS.—Mr. deForest and I, when we were in office, contemplated inaugurating as part of the routine work of the Tenement Department, a plan for the education of the tenants in the care of their homes and in the scientific principles of hygiene. Had we remained in office longer, this would have been done. It is greatly needed. It has been successfully done in smaller cities, and would be a very popular development of the Department.

It can be done in two ways: first, by the distribution of leaflets couched in popular language (very similar to our effective Tuberculosis leaflets), printed in different languages and distributed by the inspectors of the Tenement House Department whenever they visit a tenement-house, leaving these pamphlets with the tenants. In addition, such pamphlets could be distributed advantageously in the public schools, giving a pamphlet to each public school child, and also might be utilized as a permanent text book in the public schools if the educational authorities could be induced to adopt it.

The other method is through the personal work which can be done by women sanitary inspectors who will quietly and gradually gain the confidence of the tenants, working first in a small neighborhood and later extending their influence, and bringing home to the tenants in a practical way the essential things which go to make right living and home keeping.

With regard to the first method, the secretary of this Committee has, at my request, prepared a very effective educational leaflet. I would recommend that this be printed in reasonable quantities, that we urge upon Commissioner Murphy his taking this up as a departmental matter and issuing the leaflet in very large quantities and distributing it as above outlined.

With regard to the second method, I would recommend that we urge Commissioner Murphy to take this work up actively

and that he establish a bureau for this kind of work and place in charge of it Mrs. Johanna von Wagner, now the expert of the Los Angeles Housing Commission. Mrs. von Wagner is the most competent person in the United States for this kind of work and has done it very successfully for ten or twelve years. She is a trained nurse, a sanitary expert and speaks five different languages.

7. EDUCATION OF LANDLORDS.—There should be brought home to the landlord the desirability of a closer personal attention on his part to the sanitary condition of his building and the safety and welfare of his tenants. He should be encouraged to cut windows into dark rooms and help the Department. (A citizens' committee in Brooklyn has been doing this during the past year with considerable success.) Landlords should be encouraged to use light paint rather than dark-colored paint wherever possible; to make regular inspections of their premises at stated intervals, especially of cellars, plumbing and out-premises; to employ competent janitors, &c.

This work would have to be undertaken experimentally on a very small scale to see what its possibilities were. I have no illusions about it.

8. EDUCATION OF BUILDERS.—Many practical suggestions could be made to builders of new-law tenements which would result in improved conditions. To illustrate: Most of the sinks in tenement houses are entirely too low and cause women much inconvenience, if not injury to health, by having to stoop over to too great an extent. The mere calling of this to the attention of the sink manufacturers, plumbers and builders of new tenements would unquestionably bring about an improvement.

Great improvement would result in the tenement districts if a system of open back-yards could be brought about. I do not mean entirely open, though this is desirable but hardly practicable. What I would suggest is that builders be encouraged to utilize open iron fences in place of wooden fences. This would permit a much freer circulation of air and also

more light and would make the back yards more attractive and cheerful in every way. This is the prevailing system in Philadelphia where the so-called "hairpin" fence is practically the only type used. Getting out leaflets of this with photographic illustrations of it and systematically calling the attention of builders of new tenements to its advantages, giving them addresses of the manufacturers and prices as compared with wooden fences would, I believe, well repay the effort.

9. SMALL HOUSES FOR WORKINGMEN.—We have heretofore deemed that the small house for the ordinary working man was an impossibility in any part of New York City or its environs. I do not believe we are warranted in so pessimistic a conclusion. When we consider that the entire city of Philadelphia has been built up with small houses, it would seem that some similar development might be possible in certain portions of New York or near it. I do not believe that the individual detached house is possible for the ordinary workingman, but I cannot help believing that the Philadelphia type of house—small, two-story houses built in rows with party walls between—is entirely practicable in certain portions of New York. Assuming that we think it is worth studying, what should be done would be to put a man at work studying the Philadelphia house in Philadelphia, getting accurate data as to costs of land, cost of building, number of houses that need to be built at one time in order to minimize cost, necessary changes in the building law which would permit the erection of this type of house without any injury to the community, &c.; with a similar study of land values and forms of house development in the outlying boroughs of New York and even in the suburbs; that a careful report embodying the results of these investigations be presented, and then, if the conditions warrant, the taking up of this work on the part of our Committee and interesting capital to build houses of this type. I know of one man who would go into it if he could obtain the necessary loans, and I believe the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and other insurance companies, as well as the Title companies, could be induced to co-operate.

#### 10. REGULATION OF HEIGHT OF BUILDINGS.—ZONE SYSTEM.

—A successful effort should be made to regulate the height and size of buildings on a different basis in different parts of the city, and thus prevent the repetition in the outlying boroughs of the congested conditions which now prevail in Manhattan. The first step has already been taken in the preparation of a bill authorizing the appointment by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of a commission on the height of buildings, and our Committee should use every endeavor at the present session of the legislature to secure the passage of this measure and the appointment of the right kind of a commission, co-operating with such a commission to the fullest extent.

11. THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SMALL HOUSE.—At the present time, because of the Committee's concentration on tenement houses, an anomalous condition exists which should not be allowed to continue longer. While we properly forbid the erection of new tenement houses three stories high, with three families each, one on each floor, with any dark rooms in it, yet we permit to be built alongside of it, or directly opposite, a three story house containing but two families and which may have any number of dark rooms in it. The effect on the health of the inmates of dark rooms is just as bad in a two-family house as in a three-family one. The injury to the community is, of course, not quite so great as a less number of people are affected. There is no reason, however, why we should not stop the erection in the future of two-family or one-family houses with dark living rooms or dark bedrooms. This can be done by simply an amendment to the building code, and need not wait for complete code revision but can be accomplished any time.

Before this can be done, public sentiment must be aroused and the co-operation of various organizations secured. This will not be difficult; with the tuberculosis committees to aid us, it should be easily practicable. The Tenement House Department is fully awake to this situation, and in one of its recent annual reports has dwelt upon this matter at great length.

12. TWO-FAMILY HOUSES.—It is a grave question whether the entire provisions of the tenement house law, excepting certain fire provisions, should not be extended to all two-family houses and the definition of a tenement house thus broadened in its scope. This is the law in Chicago and has been the law for a number of years in many cities of the middle west, where their most recent and progressive housing laws include not only two-family houses but one-family houses. In the smaller communities where the tall tenement does not prevail to nearly as great an extent as in New York, some of the worst conditions are found in the smaller houses. This applies equally to the outlying sections of New York where vast portions of Queens, Richmond and the Bronx correspond very closely to the conditions found in the smaller cities throughout the country.

13. LACK OF SEWERS.—We have very properly prided ourselves upon the removal of the 7,000 school sinks and privies which existed in the city in 1902, and yet we are permitting in the outlying sections of the city to-day the duplication of these evils, and some subsequent administration of the Tenement House Department five or ten years from now will be again facing the evil of a vast number of school sinks and privy vaults in what will then be a well built-up portion of the City. It is short-sighted policy to acquiesce in this situation. It comes about solely through permitting the building of new tenement houses in districts where there are no public sewers. The law should forbid the erection of a tenement house under such circumstances, or in fact the erection of a two-family house, and should limit the use of cesspools and privies solely to those unbuilt-up sections of the city in which land is so low in value that one-family houses prevail.

14. THE CITY PLAN.—Though city planning vitally affects housing conditions, no one is doing anything in New York to get a better city plan, though at present there is an active revival of interest in the re-planning of the city—that is, the correction of the mistakes made in the past. There is a wide-

awake and active movement now on foot in the Borough of Brooklyn in this direction and apparently a stimulated interest in Manhattan, but what concerns us most, no one is paying attention to. I refer especially to the planning of the outlying sections of the city. No one is concentrating attention upon such questions as the size of lots into which property is divided and the width of streets and yet nearly all our housing troubles in New York, so far as the type of building is concerned, and the lack of light and ventilation, in the past have been due to the deep lot. A study of the practicability of other units of subdivision of property than 25x100 or 20x100 would show great possibilities. This should be first studied and then efforts made to induce holders of acreage land, in subdividing their property, to utilize the short lot and the narrow service street.

In addition, our Committee might very appropriately campaign with other organizations in the advocacy of a city engineer who shall control the map of the entire city so that a rational city plan may be developed. At present each borough president controls the map of his borough, with the result that no general city plan is possible.

15. MUNICIPAL IMPROVEMENT SCHEME.—The plan which Mr. Newton Stokes suggested to the Tenement House Commission in 1900, whereby the city should condemn blocks of unsanitary tenements and rebuild model tenements on the site with a parking treatment in between the rows of houses is, to my mind, the only practicable way in which we shall ever deal with the problem of congestion in the older districts, and something which necessarily must be undertaken sooner or later if we are to meet the increasing dissatisfaction of the public with the extraordinary conditions which prevail in New York.

I have not changed my view in any degree with regard to municipally operated tenement houses and am not advocating that. What I am advocating is that the city should condemn these unsanitary areas and then bring about the building of model tenements in their place by some private corporation like the City and Suburban Homes Company, which would

lease the ground on a long lease and own and operate the tenements. The members of the Committee will recall that when this matter was presented to the Tenement House Commission, it was the opinion of our then counsel, the late Edward B. Whitney, that there were constitutional objections to the carrying out of such a plan turning upon the feature of excess condemnation involved in it. I am of opinion that a bill could be framed to cover this specific plan of improvement which would not have attached to it the constitutional objections, and I think our Committee should take this matter up and consider it and begin a quiet movement for its consideration by the public authorities.

16. THE LODGER EVIL AND ROOM OVERCROWDING.—The conditions as to room-overcrowding in this city have apparently been steadily growing worse in recent years. There is no other way in which the increase of population on the lower east side can be explained. It is not strange that this should be so, as practically nothing effective has ever been done in New York City to remedy room overcrowding.

It is possible to effectively control this evil. It can not be done, however, in my opinion, with the present laws. Before it can be done there must be laid a proper basis of public support from the judges, the press, the public officials, the labor unions and the public generally. We should not, in my opinion, quietly sit by and see these conditions grow worse and worse from year to year, nor should we similarly suffer them to extend to Brooklyn, the Bronx and other boroughs. If we admit that this evil must ultimately be controlled, I think we will all agree that the sooner we begin, the less difficult our future task will be.

My own view as to the best method of control is that the chief evils are bound up with the practice of taking in lodgers and boarders, and that therefore the best way to strike at room-overcrowding is to make unlawful the taking in of lodgers or boarders into the family life without the consent of the landlord in writing and also of the Tenement House Department, holding the landlord responsible rather than the tenant for any

violation of this provision, just as he is now held responsible for the character of the people in his house (in our prostitution clause). With such a change in the law and with a well developed sentiment in the community for its enforcement, it will be entirely practicable to eradicate ultimately the whole evil of room-overcrowding.

17. AIDING THE TENANTS.—No effort has ever heretofore been made, in an organized way, to aid working people who want good houses to live in, houses that are well planned and built, and especially ones that are properly managed. The district secretaries of the Charity Organization Society and similar bodies would be greatly benefited in their work in the care of needy families if they had available a list of the tenement houses in their neighborhood which are known to be well kept from a sanitary point of view, and where the landlord does have reasonable consideration for the tenants. If this were done on an organized scale throughout the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx, its usefulness could be greatly developed. The labor unions could be interested and working men would gradually get to utilize this bureau of information before taking new rooms in any house. The effect of this in forcing landlords to a higher standard of maintenance would be very great. I think this plan is entirely feasible and could be very advantageously developed.

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The above outlines most of the important things which I consider should be included in a housing programme for New York City.

What the Director would hope that the Committee might do, would be to carefully consider this programme and thoroughly discuss it at an early meeting (which might possibly be extended into subsequent meetings if necessary) and then adopt those features of the programme which commend themselves to it, with the understanding that this would imply no obligation upon the Director and the executive staff to carry out such programme immediately, but would leave the execu-

tive staff free to take up from time to time one phase after another of this programme as the amount of work on hand, and the funds available for the work, would render practicable.

Respectfully submitted,

LAWRENCE VEILLER.

Director.

## HOUSING PROGRAMME FOR NEW YORK.

### SUMMARY.

1. Co-operation with the Tenement House Department :
  - A. General Study of Administration.
  - B. The New System in the Department.
  - C. Dark Rooms.
  - D. Basement Rooms.
  - E. Index of Landlords.
2. Corporation Counsel's Office.
3. Revision of Tenement House Law.
4. Further Improvement of Older Houses.
5. Housing Conference.
6. Education of the Tenants.
7. Education of Landlords.
8. Education of Builders.
9. Small Houses for Workingmen.
10. Regulation of Height of Buildings.
11. The Improvement of the Small House.
12. Two Family Houses.
13. Lack of Sewers.
14. The City Plan.
15. Municipal Improvement Scheme.
16. The Lodger Evil and Room Overcrowding.
17. Aiding the Tenants.

TENEMENT HOUSE COMMITTEE  
OF THE  
CHARITY ORGANIZATION SOCIETY

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